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Maurice Ravel in Polish Music Criticism (1918–1939)

Regaining independence by Poland in 1918 proved a landmark not only in politics or economics, but also in culture. In this period of intense development of music production and rich musical life, music criticism assumed a prominent role. It was a stable constituent of the contemporary music culture — an institution of social life. Critics followed the events of the day thoroughly and explored more general issues concerning, for example, the essence of changes in the contemporary music, or the relation between Polish and European music.

The Polish music criticism was based both on a number of music periodicals (i.a. „Muzyka”, „Muzyka Polska”, „Muzyka Współczesna” „Lwowskie Wiadomości Muzyczne i Teatralne”), and on the constant presence in social, cultural and literary dailies and weeklies (i.a. „Express Poranny”, „Kurier Poranny”, „Wiadomości Literackie”, „Prosto z Mostu”, „Tygodnik Ilustrowany”). This stabilization also provided a high status of the profession of a critic. The dynamics of changes in music, the presence of many competing aesthetic ideas and the fact that critics were often composers influenced the high temperature of statements and a strong polemic in criticism. A polarization of a conservative and liberal orientation was formed in criticism. Conservative criticism considered as normative (sometimes universal) the aesthetics based on various continuations of neo-romantic music. Liberal criticism — not attaching itself to a specific aesthetic — emerged from a position open to new proposals (over time, the neoclassical aesthetics became close to it).

While assessing the situation of music at that time three traditions were of particular importance: German, Russian and French. The last one, in particular, became a point of reference, since it was France where the significant changes in music language were occurring and where the preferences of young Polish composers lay¹. This, in turn, encouraged critics to comment more broadly on this area of European music culture.² Probing the French music idiom, however, did not come easy, as Felicjan Szopski pointed out: “The problem is our inherent Slavic element, which is totally different; and then there is the German culture, which left its mark on our terms”³. The criticism approach to French music was further influenced by polarization into conservatively- and liberally-oriented music criticism.

1.

As far as the liberal school was concerned, one of the most fundamental sources of pro-French beliefs was Karol Szymanowski's thought⁴. His attitude to French music was an element of the way he perceived a general situation of the contemporary music and changes occurring within it. He claimed that France was the first among Western countries to react to the stylistic hegemony of German music. In this context he often pointed to Debussy's achievements, who Szymanowski regarded as “a significant expression of never-fading *genie latin*”⁵. “Russian composers on the one hand, and Debussy and Ravel on the other, created new, formal music values, showed new paths” — wrote the au-

¹ Cf. Rafał CIESIELSKI, “Kompozytorskie pokolenie ‘debiut 1930’ wobec muzyki francuskiej” [The ‘debut of 1930’ composers’ generation towards French music], [www.demusica.pl/Pismo Muzykalia](http://www.demusica.pl/Pismo_Muzykalia), accessed 22 July 2017.

² Cf. Rafał CIESIELSKI, *Refleksja estetyczna w polskiej krytyce muzycznej Dwudziestolecia międzywojennego* [Aesthetic reflection in the Polish musical critique of the Inter-War Period (1918-1939)] (Poznań : Wydaw. Poznańskiego Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Nauk, 2005), 398–436.

³ Felicjan SZOPSKI, “Z Filharmonii” [From the philharmonic hall], *Kurier Warszawski* (12 March 1932), 6.

⁴ Henryk OPIEŃSKI had already pointed to French music as an area of new phenomena: „France reveals the types of modern tendencies that are much more interesting [than German ones — RC]” (H. Opieński, “Przyszłe drogi twórczości muzycznej” [Future paths of musical creativity], *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* (1919, No. 45–46), 739.

⁵ Szymanowski wrote that Debussy „had emphatically opened the windows of an oppressive and stifling concert hall onto some charming gardens, endless horizons of mountains, seas and skies. How far this ‘return to nature’, this pantheistic penetration of nature’s essence lies from R. Strauss’s brutal naturalism” (K. SZYMANOWSKI, “My splendid isolation”, *Kurier Polski* 1922, No. 324), 8.

thor about the current situation⁶. For Szymanowski, French music was a projection of new aesthetics, a chance to refresh compositions entangled in German metaphysics: Russian and French works “(...) came to life as a completely conscious protest against German music, as the absolute imperative of finding new musical foundation, so it could be based on completely new rules”⁷. This bias towards French music resulted from the belief about the necessity to refer (as far as the arts were concerned) to universal values and the contemporary music language, and at that time they could only come from French culture, which was created by “vast intelligence, objectiveness and justice in assessing all cultural values regardless of their origin”⁸.

Konstanty Regamey spoke of an epoch-making stylistic breakthrough when referring to French music, which, in his opinion, was “a stage of general musical development”; brought forward new proposals that led to a new aesthetic paradigm in the entire European music tradition. Regamey claimed that the national character of French music was based on introducing “fundamental reform of the general notion of musical form”⁹. He considered many composers to be the source of changes: in Franck he noticed “(...) a kind of objectiveness and coldness, (...) towards emotional outbreaks of the *style depouille* typical of the contemporary French school”; in the authors of *Schola Cantorum* (A. Guilmant, C. Bordes, V. d’Indy) “reference to the dispassion and formal excellence of former French maestros: Rameau and Couperin”; in Faure “the same exquisite coldness and moderation that is increasingly becoming a dominant feature of French music”¹⁰; finally, in Saint-Saëns “careful and elegant musical working” that “anticipates the famous cult of ‘craftsmanship’, *métier*, promoted by Ravel and his successors”¹¹.

Critics believed that the situation in French music was, on the one hand, a reaction to German stylistics, and on the other, resulted from the reference to

⁶ Karol SZYMANOWSKI, “Karol Szymanowski o muzyce współczesnej” [Karol Szymanowski on contemporary music], *Kurier Polski* (1922, No. 310), 8.

⁷ SZYMANOWSKI, “My splendid isolation”.

⁸ Karol SZYMANOWSKI, “Odpowiedź P. Adamowi Wieniawskiemu” [Answer to Mr Adam Wieniawski], in: K. Szymanowski, *Pisma* [Writings], T. I, *Pisma muzyczne* [Writings on music], ed. K. Michałowski (Kraków: Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, 1984), 163–167.

⁹ Konstanty REGAMEY, “Współczesna muzyka francuska” [Contemporary French music], *Miesięcznik Literatury i Sztuki* (1935, No. 2), 55.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Konstanty REGAMEY, “Tydzień koncertowy” [Concert week], *Prosto z Mostu* (1938, No. 14).

idiomatic properties expressed perfectly already in the French music tradition. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries it was Impressionism that became representative of this tradition and provided an appropriate context for music criticism to capture the creative attitude of Maurice Ravel.

2.

Tracing the origins of Impressionism was central to the way it was perceived. As far as the criticism was concerned, there emerged two stances that addressed this issue: 1. treating Impressionist music as an analogy with Impressionist painting and 2. pointing solely to its music roots. The ones who opted for the former included, among others, Mateusz Gliński¹² and Konstanty Regamey, for whom Impressionist painting had opened a new chapter in both French music and the entire European culture. Michał Kondracki represented a different stance — he considered Berlioz and later Wagner, with his “subtle chromatics”, melody-replacing mood, instrumentation and transformation of Berlioz’s *idée fixe* into *Leitmotiv*, to be the first music Impressionists. But the artist regarded by Kondracki as an actual creator and representative of Impressionism was Debussy, whose stylistics affected almost every composer of his time including, among others, Ravel and Dukas¹³.

By placing it within the field of heteronomism, critics associated Impressionism either with a modified programmatic tradition of Romanticism (Regamey, Kondracki), or with programmatic nature as a feature typical of French music, as it had been present in it since the 16th century (Łobaczewska). Despite transformations in the music language, this feature was preserved as one of the fundamental aesthetic ideas of French music. In this way, Impressionism could trace back its origins to French music.

How did the critics perceive the essence of Impressionism? Regamey claimed that Impressionists are interested in “a momentary, direct Impression (...), and it is the Impression that they transpose to sounds”¹⁴. This end, in his opinion, resulted in using peculiar forms of music expression that were

¹² Matusz GLIŃSKI, “Peleas i Melizanda Maeterlincka-Debussy’ego” [Pelleas and Melisande by Maeterlinck-Debussy], *Muzyka* (1928, No. 4–5), 153.

¹³ Jan KORAL [Michał KONDRACKI], “Na marginesie nowej muzyki” [On the margins of new music], *Wiadomości Muzyczne* (1925, No. 5–6), 156.

¹⁴ Konstanty REGAMEY, “Muzyka współczesna (dokończenie)” [Contemporary music (continued)], *Miesięcznik Literatury i Sztuki* (1935, No. 8), 251.

quite different from the ones used previously. And it was here, on the ground of pure music matter, in the ways it was ordered, that a crucial turnaround had occurred. Regamey believed that, initially, Debussy and Ravel had created a style that was an introductory phase of Impressionism (*Ur-Impressionismus*). Only later they both began to develop the same general assumptions of the movement (opposition to German Symbolism, turn toward sound) in their individual way¹⁵. Regamey thought that because Impressionism was about an unreflective and unemotional atmosphere, where direct impression boils down to sensory experiences, music must affect hearing in a direct way. Therefore, the sound factor comes to the fore. Its superiority and overemphasis led to it becoming usual¹⁶, which in turn restricted the use of other factors in the composing process (polyphony, form, melodic continuity, symmetry, thematic logic). As a consequence “the entire music was reduced to refined coloristic effects [which], at first, tease the jaded nerves nicely; but as with all sensual stimuli, the reaction fades after some time and weariness moves in. This is when you feel the emptiness of this music” — wrote Regamey. This dominance of coloristic tendencies causes the emphasis to be put particularly on harmony — and this is where Impressionists discover a new world. However, consonances lack the dynamic moment, “they are static color stains, put one next to another” — this led to amorphism and deprived thematicity of harmonic basis. Coloristic searches also influenced the development of orchestral techniques and — contrary to Strauss overload — “the unusual subtlety and clarity of sound”.¹⁷ Regamey defined Impressionism as a bundle of features: over-refinement, avoidance of great dynamic flamboyance and powerful sounds, amorphism, coloristic wit¹⁸, “landscapism and picturesqueness in thematicity”, “enrichment and refinement of instrumentation”¹⁹.

¹⁵ Konstanty REGAMEY, “Z ruchu muzycznego w Polsce” [On musical movement in Poland], *Muzyka Polska* (1938, No. 1), 4.

¹⁶ For „(...) all these Impressionists’ features were taken — partially by Debussy, partially by his imitators — to the point of mannerism and affectation; this is where all the flawed assumptions of this aesthetical movement surfaced”, REGAMEY, “Współczesna muzyka francuska”.

¹⁷ Regamey pointed to the midpoint of Debussy’s artistic career (*Estampes, Images, Preludes, Iberia, Nocturnes, Peleas and Melizanda*) as being “genuinely typical of Impressionism”, *ibid.*

¹⁸ REGAMEY, “Muzyka współczesna”.

¹⁹ Konstanty REGAMEY, “Maurycy Ravel”, *Muzyka Polska* (1938, No. 1), 4.

Another issue addressed by the critics was an affective element present in Impressionism. Regamey registered the shift in emphasis from this emotional content towards moodiness, that is the reaction coming directly from physiological influence of sounds: “in place of music of emotion, we get music of senses”²⁰. Having adopted a different stance, Leon Popławski deprived Impressionism of affectivity. By stating that “the essence of music lies in a melody as a projection of emotional life”, he claimed that Impressionism rejected music in this particular sense, for it was “mind, not emotion, that provided the creative spark”²¹. Therefore, he accused Impressionist invention of „being characterized by anemia common for music Impressionists,” adding that “its paleness and blandness of themes make it impossible for Impressionism to cope with the symphonic forms”. In place of traditionally comprehended melody — as a theme — the author noticed a mere presence of “minute motifs that are being artistically tinkered with”²². At the same time, the lack of melody proved the lack of emotional inspiration, whereas depriving creation of affectivity lowered the status of this music. Consequently, despite acknowledging the increase in means of expression and “liberation from the restraints of artificial logic of form,” Popławski considered Impressionism a closed chapter. This opinion was expressed on the basis of explicitly Romantic aesthetic premises: primacy of melody (as the essence of music) and relying on emotions to fill it with content. Lack of these elements disqualified Impressionism as an artistic idea, and the weakness of this movement was confirmed by its ephemeral character and “passing away without deeper impression”.

Kondracki did find emotional qualities in Impressionism. He claimed that “Impressionist music (...) has so much warmth and affection (...) that many a listener will find in [it] (...) more passion of inspiration, that is emotion, than in many works of Romantic gushiness”²³. In fact, Kondracki, treating affection as a valorizing factor, shared the same pre-Impressionist aesthetic ideas as Popławski. They both believed in the universality of emotion as a creative impulse. The difference was that — contrary to Popławski — Kondracki found in

²⁰ REGAMEY, “Współczesna muzyka francuska”.

²¹ Piotr Rytel pointed to the broader context of the opposition between emotion and reason — to the fact that they had been reversed in the artistic culture: “nowadays it is easier for us to comprehend than to feel. It used to be exactly the other way round” (W. NARUSZ [Piotr RYTEL], “Muzyka” [Music], *Mysł Narodowa* 1937, No. 1), 13.

²² LEON POPŁAWSKI, *Torami nowej muzyki*, Lwów-Warszawa 1924, 145–146.

²³ KONDRACKI, “Na marginesie...”.

Impressionists an emotional element that was other than melody (in the coloristic medium). Paradox of this situation stemmed from the fact that Kondracki treasured Impressionism for those values which the movement distanced itself from, whereas Popławski questioned Impressionism for the lack of elements that were ideologically alien to it.

Critics' deliberations about Impressionism stretched between two extremes: auto- or heterogenesis, presence or absence of affectivity, sound or structural emphasis. The critics believed that the prevalence of sound sometimes made Impressionism become aesthetically one-dimensional which undermined its formal fundament. However, this tendency was curbed, in critics' opinion, already in Debussy. Kondracki was the one to point to the classical-making elements (in *Quartet* and *Hommage a Rameau*, as well as in *Le martyre de Saint Sébastien*). He thought that this turnaround "brought Debussy closer to the classical epoch (...) moving him away from Romanticism"²⁴. Regamey also registered the decrease in the Impressionist flaws, for Debussy put some works (*Suite Bergamasque*, sonatas, *Études*, the suite *En blanc et noir*) into frames of rigid structures which proved his perfect sense of form. This was the way to follow the calls issued by *Schola Cantorum* for the return to Rameau and Couperin with their formal mastery. According to the critics, Debussy did not manage to settle this issue; it was addressed by Ravel, though.

3.

Saving for Debussy's achievements, Maurice Ravel's artistic work was the most closely examined area of French music. For the critics, Ravel was a contemporary composer *sensu stricto*. His music was present in the concert repertoire and it was him who — after Debussy's demise — became the most important representative of the French music tradition.

The most important feature that the critics distinguished in Ravel's work stylistic included attention to the shape of sound (color) of a given work — a feat achieved owing to the mastery of the technique of instrumentation. This colorfulness was addressed even by conservative critics, who questioned other elements of his style or the entire Ravel's idiom. This is how Stanisław Niewiadomski wrote about the poem *La Valse*: "He surrounded the most beautiful

²⁴ Michał KONDRACKI, "Cechy i elementy twórczości Maurycego Ravela na tle współczesnej epoki" [Features and elements of the work of Maurice Ravel on the background of the modern era], *Wiadomości Muzyczne* (1925, No. 1), 8.

Danubian melodies with thick clouds of poisonous gases, doing it with the artistry typical of the most proficient orchestral experimentalist. The melodies are choking and stifling but eventually weather the storm (...), whereas modernist literature “becomes enriched” by the new acquisition so that the critics of the future have more work discarding writings on the spur of some whimsical moment with no reflection whatsoever, but with a cynical smile mocking at music and its listeners”²⁵.

The disproportion between appreciating Ravel’s coloristic effectiveness and questioning the form of other elements was typical of the conservative critics. On the one hand, they accused the composer of being not distinctive (in a form-making sense) in running harmonic and melodic pattern, on the other, they considered tone color to be an element that is not autonomous, thus incapable of being the only structural basis of a work. Sometimes tone color was treated as a kind of “sub-standard” music element²⁶.

For the liberal criticism, those sound qualities were the most significant element of Ravel’s stylistics. Opinions concerning his particular music pieces, when expressing general admiration, often referred to coloristic attractiveness and unusual instrumental solutions. This implicitly challenged and aesthetically redefined the former hierarchy of music elements. Tone color became a factor that was regulating and, to a large extent, defining the shape of a music piece. This was confirmed by unanimous opinions concerning i.e. Ravel’s *Daphnis*. Roman Jasiński, among others, wrote: “*Daphnis*, with all its bizarre features outlined and concentrated here in a clear and tangible way, is, so to speak, a synthesis of Ravel’s entire artistic work. (...) Ravel is a great poet and a wizard of sound, color is everything in his music and his achievements

²⁵ Stanisław NIEWIADOMSKI, “Z sali koncertowej i z opery” [From the concert hall and the opera house], *Rzeczpospolita* (11 May 1924).

²⁶ Piotr Rytel wrote: „Maurice Ravel is one of these supposedly magical musicians to whom we owe the moments of audio-sensual excitement. A listener is being attracted by his works, for they unfold richness of color, blind with their exoticness — but they are so short-lasting! (...) The concept behind *The Spanish Hour* is thoroughly confusing (...). As a result of dissonance, listener’s hearing weakens (...) and pretty soon he ceases to react even to the color. Then, boredom moves in — and it kills outright (...) Ravel’s instrumental color is, as always, elaborate, subtle and shining with myriads of associations — excellent, humorous and fresh. This is the strongest aspect of the work, unquestionably of high quality, but insufficient to grant it long lifespan. After all, it is not a musical element, but merely its fraction” (Piotr RYTEL, “Wieczory muzyczne” [Musical evenings], *Gazeta Warszawska* 7 III 1925), 2.

in this field are incredible; as for the score of *Daphnis*, it will remain a treasury of the most subtle instrumental and harmonic ideas for a long time”²⁷. Others to marvel at effectiveness of tone color included Felicjan Szopski, who wrote about “the music that is conceptually splendid, rich in tone colors, full of healthy life and juicy rhythmicity, written with exceptional taste and extraordinary technical mastery”²⁸, and Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, who addressed the qualities of instrumentalization in *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (on the occasion of Polish premiere): “this is transparent lace, merry frolic of tingling waters (...). Oh, isn’t this Ravel a maestro! One won’t see through his erudition: he will sketch few bars, tangle few instruments into some golden web (...), rustle as if he was rustling leaves in an autumn garden and there he is, working miracles”²⁹.

Ravel, however, had much more to offer than just tone color. Other mentions included a classically constructed form and a logical course of thematic content. These qualities were emphasized by the critics with equal fervor. „Under the pretence of grace or even elegance (...) Ravel slips delicious music qualities into his art. Coloring of his music is not a purpose itself, but a charming pretext for uttering truly original and fresh music ideas — seemingly chaotic but, in fact, deeply logical” — wrote Stanisław Baliński³⁰. Regamey claimed that *Daphnis* is “a classic model of emotionally cold, but full of glitter and color, magnificently instrumented, ideally pure and clear, French music”³¹. At the same time, he considered the quality of structural order a constant element of the composer’s style.³² Zygmunt Mycielski also addressed Ravel’s care about formal aspect, his perfect craftsmanship and awareness in creating. This last quality, in Mycielski’s opinion, was typical of French art: “In this way Ravel joins the greatest French artists, all of whom were characterized by awareness of artistic endeavor and aversion to uncontrolled pathos, inspiration and blind self-admiration. His merits stem from ruminations on the form, harmonic plan of a work, order of melodic lines and significance of sound of particular

²⁷ Roman JASIŃSKI, “Muzyka” [Music], *Wiadomości Literackie* (1926, No. 20), 4.

²⁸ SZOPSKI, “Z Filharmonii”.

²⁹ Jarosław IWASZKIEWICZ, “Koncert reprezentacyjny. Koncert inauguracyjny” [Representative concert. Inaugural concert], *Wiadomości Literackie* (1924, No. 39), 5.

³⁰ Stanisław BALIŃSKI, “Muzyka” [Music], *Wiadomości Literackie* (1925, No. 15).

³¹ Konstanty REGAMEY, “Ferrero i Thibaut” [Ferrero and Thibaut], *Prosto z Mostu* (1936, No. 51).

³² He claimed that amorphism, so typical of Impressionism, had never occurred in Ravel’s works (REGAMEY, “Maurycy Ravel”).

instruments (...). Ravel was perfectly sober and conscious when he saw the greatest peril of art in latitude, let's say, in the capricious freedom and lack of form that the so-called 'inspiration' brings"³³. Mycielski placed Ravel in one of the areas of (timeless) opposition: "Whoever is touched by precision or notion of form in art comes closer to the 'classical' approach, whereas those who are moved by the 'expression' of line or some modulation come closer to the styles referred to as 'Romanticism' or 'Impressionism'. (...) Ravel's 'feature' is that he turned his entire creative approach towards the elements which I classified as 'classical'. (...) That is why he is not the one who concludes the Impressionist times, but the one who opens new ways. (...) In this experimenting chaos each page by Ravel introduced moderation and tidiness"³⁴. This way the author separated the expression-oriented stylistics (as the one that was passing away at that particular historical moment) from the "structurally-oriented" one. By regarding Ravel as a representative of the latter approach, Mycielski placed the composer beyond (above?) Impressionism.

Kondracki pointed to the difference between Ravel's and Debussy's approach. Treating the former as an Impressionist he thought that "Ravel quickly shook off the overwhelming influence of 'Debussism' and established his own, original style"³⁵. Impressionism remained the foundation here but he expanded it with: 1. stressing the importance of the formal factor (aspiring to classical forms, to former French maestros: Rameau and Couperin). Kondracki believed that Ravel's use of classical forms had reached "the ultimate level of perfection"³⁶, 2. emphasizing the rhythmical factor (in ballets), 3. adopting a new approach to harmony (essentially Impressionist in nature, based on using single consonances and their new structure, thus more radical when compared to Debussy's), 4. treating tone color as a combination of instrumental timbres.

Many was the time the critics would stress Ravel's technical competence, which was the foundation of formal mastery, clearness of structure and its classicizing balance. Sometimes, mastering the rules of composing — *métier* —

³³ Zygmunt MYCIELSKI, "Ravel", *Muzyka Współczesna* (1938, No. 1). Here, the author quoted Ravel himself: „Art has been given to us to make order. We do it by speculating. Let's stop talking about inspiration. Inspiration in music is the ability to speculate with the twelve tones”, and commented it in the following way: „I wouldn't call this statement the 'Impressionist's' confession of faith. It's the heir of Clement Jannequin and the Clouets that utters these words”.

³⁴ MYCIELSKI, "Ravel".

³⁵ KONDRACKI, "Na marginesie..."

³⁶ Ibidem.

was crucial in acknowledging a work, since it was the use of technique which “reached heights of the contemporary orchestral artistry” that made the work attain “that characteristic of essential aesthetical value”³⁷. Sometimes, however, it occurred that — in critics’ opinion — this emphasis on tone color and *métier* led to negligence of other elements — especially the ones related to “the content”. Gliński described *Tzigane* as “a witty firework of passages, trills, chords and flageolets (...). One couldn’t find there any profound content; features of Ravel’s style appear only fleetingly (...). Therefore, as a work representing the greatest French composer of the time, *Tzigane* must have been disappointing...”³⁸. As for *La Valse*, Iwaszkiewicz claimed that „it is a very skillfully constructed poem (...), [although] there occurs an unpleasant disproportion between measures and the content which evokes the sense of emptiness”³⁹.

Regamey examined Ravel’s achievements in a broad perspective, regarding the composer as the one who made a great recapitulation and — in a sense — overcame the music of his time — Impressionist music, in particular. “Unlike Strawiński — Regamey wrote — Ravel wasn’t the inventor of entirely new music aspects (...), he performed a role, though, that was of no lesser importance and, in some respects, even more important. (...) he provided the synthesis of the entire movement — one of the most productive ones in the development of music that followed — preserved all of [its] positive aspects (...), disposed of everything that was accidental, exaggerated and unable to flourish, led all the niggling, sometimes contradictory, elements of his epoch to a bizarre Mozartian balance, and consequently rose high above the movement [Impressionism — RC] he represented”⁴⁰. Regamey stated that for many the Debussy-Ravel duo was a symbol of Impressionism, whereas for others it

³⁷ Mateusz GLIŃSKI, “Z opery i sal koncertowych” [From the opera and concert halls], *Muzyka* (1930, No. 11–12). Gliński believed that technique could „support” even a work with „trivial, uninteresting theme” and „risky compositional concept” — the features that, in his opinion, characterized *Bolero*.

³⁸ Mateusz GLIŃSKI, “Z opery i sal koncertowych” [From the opera and concert halls], *Muzyka* (1925, No. 10), 39.

³⁹ Jarośław IWASZKIEWICZ, “Muzyka” [Music], *Wiadomości Literackie* (1924, No. 44), 5. Ravel was even accused of artistic ‘sidestepping’ in some of his pieces. Iwaszkiewicz wrote that *Tzigane* was a musical piece “that fell into the category of ‘jokes’ which helped Ravel to shirk the responsibilities of a serious, music chore. The result of such work is inevitable: just like you miss a real Strauss waltz when listening to *La Valse*, you miss real Sarasate when listening to *La Tzigane*” (J. Iwaszkiewicz, “Muzyka” [Music], *Wiadomości Literackie* (1925, No. 42), 5.

⁴⁰ REGAMEY, “Maurycy Ravel”.

represented contrast. As for Regamey, he believed that “both these theses are true: Ravel was a continuator of the Impressionist features that could develop, an adversary of what was destined to disappear. In this way he established his own trend, let’s say ‘Ravelism’, for this trend had never had any technical name but soon became a model of what we call the contemporary French music”⁴¹. For Regamey, Ravel was “unquestionably the greatest and the most ‘French’ of musicians from the contemporary France”, “the symbol of French style”⁴². At the same time, Regamey believed Ravel to have a strong, creative personality, which for forty years had allowed him to keep an unique profile: it was not the case of isolating own artistic work, but the result of skillful combination of well-known (accessible) elements with high standards, and an uncompromising artistic nature.

Looking at Ravel the Impressionist Regamey pointed to the presence of the following qualities in the composer’s works: 1. tone color — the art of making the most refined tone colors, creating “the ‘French’ instrumentation that was clear and sparing in terms of measures” (in this area Ravel surpassed Debussy), 2. anti-Romantic aversion to emotionality in music — “this famous ‘shyness in showing emotion’”, which the composer stressed more than others, becoming “the symbol of anti-emotional music.” Emotions present in Ravel’s music are there but only allegorically, symbolically, allusively, with all the moderation. In this particular form they are his favorite means of music expression; hence his 3. “coldness”, which did not result from Ravel’s personality but was self-imposed discipline. He fought emotionality with irony, humor and “most of all, with what is referred to as ‘*métier*’ — the extraordinary quality typical of French music” and, at the same time, one of its major mottos. *Métier* helped the composer to produce works that were arranged down to the last detail as far as the sound, instrumental and especially formal aspects were concerned. In this last case Ravel referred to French *carte*, which was already present in harpsichord players’ works (Regamey). Another thing characteristic of Impressionism (and Ravel) was 4. variety of refined forms, which did not come to the fore, though. Ravel remained moderate, objective — hence the shade of classical coldness and peace in his works. This particular character of Ravel’s art reveals his individual approach to Impressionist ideas, especially in

⁴¹ Ibidem.

⁴² Ibidem.

overcoming Impressionist negligence of formal aspects⁴³. In Regamey's opinion, the composer realized "the danger of melting music in some smudges of sound, reducing its effects almost entirely to physiological impressions. And so, with all the austerity, he introduced the structural element" referring to French harpsichord players of the 17th and 18th century⁴⁴. For Regamey, Ravel was the one who, while expanding the variety of Impressionists' timbres ("he is one of the greatest maestros of instrumental tone color"), made them constituents of clear and classically flawless formal structure⁴⁵. At the same time, he was creating „something utterly complete, refined and exquisite using very simple measures — slight rhythmic and harmonic shifts”⁴⁶. Ravel "(...) possessed this magic ability (...) to equip the most diverse elements with his unique, precise, clean, polished, one hundred percent complete music”⁴⁷. He achieved a feat more difficult than inventing new tone systems — in a situation of depleted measures he used the former and not-so-revolutionary measures to create music that was “fresh, original and long-lasting”.

Plenty of Ravel's music properties that were addressed by critics, at the same time constituted the essential (extra-stylistic) features of French music. The composer's “Frenchness” seemed to emerge in an obvious way. His

⁴³ Regamey wrote: „After Romantics' ‘depth’ and ‘expressiveness’, ‘moodiness’ of early Impressionists, ‘*métier*’ — that is, formal and technical mastery — became the new motto; and this is where Ravel's main inventiveness lies. Regamey drew an analogy to Cezanne and Renoir, who also responded to Impressionist “artificiality” by turning towards the form; REGAMEY, “Maurycy Ravel”.

⁴⁴ REGAMEY, “Maurycy Ravel”. Awareness of Ravel's (almost historic) attitude towards Impressionism was stressed by Mycielski: “Ravel reacts to Impressionism in the most perfect manner; skips all those years of doubt and tests. His work also becomes more self-explanatory — initially diverse, contradictory and with eclectic appearances, as the perspective broadens and becomes more epochal, assumes ‘the line’ and accounts for itself” (MYCIELSKI, “Ravel”).

⁴⁵ REGAMEY, “Współczesna muzyka”. In one of his reviews the author presented exemplification of this process as follows: “It was his [Debussy's] *La Mer* (...) that perfectly illustrated the promises and perils of Impressionism. On the one hand, there was refinement of color and instrumentation which relieved music of pseudo-philosophical and literal burdens, on the other, some loosening of form and content of music which melted it in coloristic episodes. A vivid contrast to this music was provided by Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloe* suite No. 2 — one could not fail to notice here Ravel's great achievement as he managed to maintain Impressionism's color elements (making a massive step forward in this field), while rescuing its deficiencies by reintroducing content and formal clarity into this music” (Konstanty REGAMEY, “Tydzień koncertowy” [Concert week], *Prosto z Mostu* 1938, No. 14).

⁴⁶ REGAMEY, “Tydzień koncertowy”

⁴⁷ REGAMEY, “Maurycy Ravel”.

reference to the qualities of Latin art was connected with stressing the resistance to German aesthetics and genre conventions. Juliusz Kaden-Bandrowski described Ravel's *L'Heure espagnole* as „shimmering and sparkling, with variety of excellent humor, liberated from all the patterns, clear in color, full of light sentiment of melodies written with enormous grace (...). Ravel's music is (...) a charm-filled revolution against 'big' opera and (...) musical drama. This music seems to show the way — who knows if not the only one — for opera to develop. This way runs between Wagner's heavy symphony with solo voices and a well worn mechanism of an Italian texture. One would like to say — a rapid move by the present day combined with the most robust possible brevity of music thought”⁴⁸.

Stefania Łobaczewska, on the other hand, completely ignored the detachment from German traditions. When characterizing Ravel she started by mentioning his ties with “French circles”. She regarded his approach to the tone — programmatic in nature, therefore treating the tone as an extra-musical factor — as keeping with tradition. This programmatic nature — here Łobaczewska was close to Regamey's stance — ranked Ravel among the 19th-century Romantics⁴⁹. Still, Ravel's programmatic approach did not undergo changes: it deviated from concrete themes towards the programmatic mood transposed to the plane of a tone. Here, Łobaczewska noticed a characteristic feature of Ravel's music: “an impersonal flavor of his works”. It was achieved by realization of the program solely with music measures: the program and its corresponding music became an organic whole. This led to widening the gap between a creator and a theme (program), and to objectification of music. This feature would coincide with the belief that the program-realizing element is, firstly, rhythm and, secondly, texture and form⁵⁰. This approach, along with his way of treating harmony, tone color and instrumentation, ranked Ravel among Impressionists.

⁴⁸ Juliusz KADEN-BANDROWSKI, “Muzyka w Warszawie” [Music in Warsaw], *Świat* (1925, No. 12).

⁴⁹ Stefania ŁOBACZEWSKA, “Na przełomie dwóch epok. Maurycy Ravel” [At the turn of two eras. Maurice Ravel], *Ateneum* (1938, No. 4).

⁵⁰ Rhythm is not a separate element here but a mood-related factor, in which mood results from the program, bears coloristic meaning and is most closely related with sound. Łobaczewska cited *Bolero* as an example where repetitiveness of rhythms becomes a mood-making effect through changes of color and instrumentation.

Ravel's departure from the programmatic nature of Romanticism was not the departure from programmatic nature as such. The reason was his affiliation to the French music tradition, which had programmatic nature as its immanent constituent, and it was "a tone at the service of extramusical program that promoted the greatest ideas of French composers; it was the source of their creative inspiration"⁵¹. Although Łobaczewska acknowledged an autonomous nature of Ravel's and Debussy's evolution, in both cases she stressed the impact of French circles and tradition.

Then, there is Karol Szymanowski's opinion that completes the picture of Ravel's work: clear, revealing Szymanowski's ideological affinity with the composer, exploring plenty of themes and — being chronologically first — providing an ideological background for many of the cited views. In Szymanowski's opinion there is "beauty and order" in Ravel's music. They are features that provide it with its outer splendor, though this is not where the essence of Ravel's art lies; it is not this "cold, soulless 'aestheticism' (...), under this 'surface' there is lurking lucid, peaceful, self-centered depth, and owing to this depth 'the surface' shimmers with the play of light and color"⁵². Szymanowski attributed this feature of Ravel's work to the character of Latin art: the pursuit of the perfect work, of its ideological "self-determination" that surpasses reality and experience⁵³. Furthermore, Szymanowski claimed that "intelligence operating with infallible efficiency" goes together with "infallible instinct originating from great depths of creative emotion", combined with "this bizarre 'shyness' of emotion that characterizes all the most noble individuals in the world of art"⁵⁴.

Szymanowski regarded Ravel as an ideological continuator of Debussy's line, with both composers fighting for original French music and an approach

⁵¹ ŁOBACZEWSKA, "Na przełomie dwóch epok. Maurycy Ravel". Adam Szpak regarded Ravel as an artist who combined own individuality with features of the French music traditions. He wrote that "Ravel's composing psyche is ultra-French. Ravel is a sonorised Gallic '*esprit*'; the cult of subtlety, the ultimate aesthetic refinement of sound. Ravel is always himself and he is always French" (Adam SZPAK, "Życie kulturalne. Koncerty symfoniczne" [Cultural life. Symphonic concerts], *Wiedza i Życie* 1932, No. 4), 228.

⁵² Karol SZYMANOWSKI, "Maurycy Ravel z okazji pięćdziesięciolecia od dnia urodzin" [Maurice Ravel — to celebrate the 50th anniversary of his birthday], *Muzyka* 1925, No. 3, 96.

⁵³ He wrote: „I think that such is the individual 'depth' of French art in its greatest and most difficult manifestations (...). Great is the extent of this lucid 'depth' in Ravel's art. (...) he is forever remaining one of the most fascinating representatives of the genius of his race" (Szymanowski, "Maurycy Ravel z okazji pięćdziesięciolecia od dnia urodzin").

⁵⁴ SZYMANOWSKI, "Maurycy Ravel z okazji pięćdziesięciolecia od dnia urodzin".

to art “which would be the outcome of their racial qualities and common spiritual culture”. Szymanowski, however, pointed to some fundamental differences, for Ravel, while following Debussy, “quickly finds (...) his own, certain path”. What Szymanowski strongly questioned was ranking Ravel as an Impressionist, claiming that structural and formal elements of his works always predominate over improvisatory ‘sensitivity’, their novelty is based on mastery of *métier*, and there is no trace of the ‘revolutionary approach’, which prefers ‘destroying’ to building and, therefore, rejects all the values <of yesterday>. Quite the contrary — at the bottom of his artistic sensitivity there is traditionalism, based on the racial awareness of culture.

For Szymanowski, Ravel was, in a sense, ‘an aristocrat of spirit’⁵⁵; an artist of individual nature, perfect technique and sense of form, an exquisite way of expressing emotions and respect for (nationally reinforced, therefore extra-stylistic) music tradition. He was a (stylistically) modern and (culturally) traditional artist; a representative of “possibly the most beautiful artistic culture of the world”, who combined all of this culture’s essentials. Ravel’s attitude was, in a sense, close to Szymanowski’s aestheticism — one can notice some spiritual kinship.

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The Polish music criticism of the inter-war period placed Ravel’s music in context of the French music. She provided clear outlines of this music, registered also its subtle shades and half-lights. For critics, it was Debussy (and Impressionism) who led French music into modernity, though they often perceived his works in a very one-sided way — as bringing coloristic and expressionist factors to the forefront, neglecting other aspects, especially the structural ones. This Impressionist weakness (practically it was Impressionism that Debussy’s stylistic line was associated with) was overcome by Maurice Ravel.

Criticism’s perception of Ravel was a derivative / function of the polarization of criticism towards options: conservative and liberal. Conservative criticism, noticing Ravel’s color qualities, but starting from the position of neo-romantic aesthetics, could not consider them a form-creating factor sufficient

⁵⁵ When addressing Ravel’s tendency to reach for the Old French maestros, Szymanowski spoke about the composer’s “aristocratic ‘genealogy’”.

for the work and a sufficient basis for formulating a positive assessment of the composer. Liberal critics saw Ravel's work as a coherent, harmonious whole, formally clear and logical, perfect from the composer's *metier*, rich in the field of colors, rhythms and instrumentation. It placed Ravel among the outstanding French composers and within the tradition of French music and at the same time noticing his individual attitude.

Ravel focused attention on structural elements, while remembering about tone color, which he — when compared to Debussy — significantly developed. In this way, he managed to aesthetically combine sound refinement with formal perfection. The critics perceived Ravel as “a neo-classical Impressionist”, perfect in terms of composing technique and, at the same time, emotionally reserved. Close to the tradition of French music, Ravel realized his own artistic aspirations. According to them, he modified Debussy's achievements, creating new quality and offering new perspectives for the contemporary French music. Against this background, Ravel's work was seen as an optimal combination of elements of the French music idiom and the individual features of the composer.

The critics regarded Ravel's works as a significant artistic achievement, both within the frames of French music — as a stylistic alternative to the German tradition — and in the European perspective. In critics' opinion, the new generation of French composers inspired by the present day (with their technique, willingness to challenge the tradition, references to the current lifestyle, trends, etc.) did not ensure an artistically adequate continuation. It was a highly individualised group (Les Six) that clearly departed from Latin aesthetics and stratified the essential line of French music which Ravel and Debussy had outlined. The picture that emerged was that of a transitional period, marked by artistic regress and requiring searches for a new paradigm.

Translated by Patryk Kowalski

Summary

While assessing the situation of music at that time three traditions were of particular importance: German, Russian and French. The last one, in particular, became a point of reference, since it was France where the significant changes in music language were occurring and where the preferences of young Polish composers lay. This, in turn, encouraged critics to comment more broadly on this area of European music culture. Saving for Debussy's achievements, Maurice Ravel's artistic work was the most closely examined area of French music. For the critics, Ravel was a contemporary composer *sensu stricto*. His music was present in the concert repertoire and it was him who — after Debussy's demise — became the most important representative of the French music tradition. The disproportion between appreciating Ravel's coloristic effectiveness and questioning the form of other elements was typical of the conservative critics. On the one hand, they accused the composer of being not distinctive (in a form-making sense) in running harmonic and melodic pattern, on the other, they considered tone color to be an element that is not autonomous, thus incapable of being the only structural basis of a work. For the liberal criticism, those sound qualities were the most significant element of Ravel's stylistics. Opinions concerning his particular music pieces, when expressing general admiration, often referred to coloristic attractiveness and unusual instrumental solutions.

The critics perceived him as “a neo-classical Impressionist”, perfect in terms of composing technique and, at the same time, emotionally reserved. Close to the tradition of French music, Ravel realized his own artistic aspirations. According to them, he modified Debussy's achievements, creating new quality and offering new perspectives for the contemporary French music. The critics regarded Ravel's works as a significant artistic achievement, both within the frames of French music — as a stylistic alternative to the German tradition — and in the European perspective. In critics' opinion, the new generation of French composers inspired by the present day (with their technique, willingness to challenge the tradition, references to the current lifestyle, trends, etc.) did not ensure an artistically adequate continuation. It was a highly individualised group (Les Six) that clearly departed from Latin aesthetics and stratified the essential line of French music which Ravel and Debussy had outlined. The picture that emerged was that of a transitional period, marked by artistic regress and requiring searches for a new paradigm.

Keywords: Ravel, polish music criticism, French music, impressionism.